

Livin' in the Gray (not for long) by theinksplotch

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Summary:

If God created everything the way he did for a reason, he must've been pulling some kind of sick prank when he made me, Mike Wheeler often thinks.

Why else would Mike's soulmate be another boy?

(That one au where everything is black and white until you touch your soulmate)

1. Sunsets

Soulmate.

The word alone was enough to make Mike Wheeler want to cover his ears and hum one of his sister's nursery rhymes just so he wouldn't have to hear it anymore. It was like listening to a friggin' broken record, *re-re-repeating* itself over and over! *In a world of black and white, the touch of a person's soulmate was the only thing that could bring color to it, yada yada yada.* Mike knew the story, *everybody* knew the story. It was all anybody his age ever talked about, especially considering the time of year—*Autumn*. Hawkins High always conducted the Soulmate Test in the Fall, when the town was covered in a blanket of freshly fallen leaves and the air smelled like pumpkins and chimney smoke.

Now, the Soulmate Test was something every school in America conducted. It was sort of like a bench mark test, only for love, Mike liked to think. The school would pull students out of class in groups and ask each person individually to identify a bunch of colors. If you got them all right, that meant you knew who your soulmate was. Good for you—your name is crossed off a list and sent to the government, or the schoolboard or wherever, Mike guessed. If you didn't, better luck next year, kid. You'd think it was impossible to know which colors from which. How would you know what red looked like—or blue, or pink or green or yellow—if you never seen it in color before? Well after you've been touched by your soulmate, you just...know. Some kind of deep human intuition, is what the teachers always said. Suddenly, you'll know green from blue from orange as easily as you know your own name and it will be the most beautiful experience of your life *blah blah blah...*

Then at the end of it all there was this big school dance, for all the kids with soulmates to prance around looking into eachother's eyes like *total* dweebs. Dustin was going—much to Mike's annoyance, only he thought *Mike* was the annoying one. Dustin always said he talked about soulmates the way Jan talked about Marsha in The Brady Bunch—*soulmate, soulmate, soulmate.*

Ugh, *soulmates*...

It sounded perfect, right? A match made in heaven, man and woman perfect for each other in every way. A happy life full of color and love. *Adam and Eve*.

Not quite.

"Michael?"

Mike looked up from where his hands lay in his lap, cold fingers playing absentmindedly with a loose string hanging off the inner seam of his jeans. He was sitting in the nurse's office at Hawkins High School, the nervous *tap tap tap* from the rubber-soled toe of his Converse high-top against the linoleum tiles bouncing off the barren walls like an echo in a cave. One of the windows on the other side of the room had been pushed open, filtering in crisp Autumn air from the world outside that flushed Mike's cheeks and sent chills down his spine. The school nurse was peering down at him expectantly through cheap, bedazzled cat-eye glasses. *Nurse Syd* was her name. She'd worked at Hawkins High since forever, probably since Mike's parents attended. She smelled like cigarettes and old lady perfume.

Mike sucked in a shallow breath, trying his best to breathe through his mouth—he hated the smell of the nurse's office, like vomit and cleaning chemicals (and cigarettes and old lady perfume).

"Uh...what was the question again?" he asked nervously, knowing fully well what Nurse Syd had just asked him. It was always the same question, every year. It had never bothered him before, but now...

"I asked if you could identify this color, hon," the woman held up a shiny paper card, the kind they gave kids in kindergarten to learn site words and numbers and all that. Mike knew the right answer was on the other side, the color's name. She pursed her lips, sticky with bright *red* lipstick.

Yeah, Mike could "*identify*" the color, every color. Around him, the Nurse's Office only consisted of three—the stoic white tiles that lined the floor beneath Mike's sneakers, the chipping mustard yellow wallpaper around them, and the muted gray upholstery of the

worn out chair he was currently sitting on. The card the nurse held was a light shade of pink, like the sunsets on warm days. Mike had taken a certain liking to those kinds of shades, pastel yellows and periwinkle blues. Soft colors—

Soft like squishy cheeks and slender fingers and pretty hazel eyes that turned green in the sun.

Kaleidoscope eyes.

Mike shook his head slightly, like that would rid his brain of the distracting thoughts that ran through it practically 24/7.

Concentrate, Wheeler, he told himself. The sooner you answer this question, the sooner you get outta here.

The sooner Hawkins High would stay the *hell* out of his business.

"Michael?" Syd asked, gesturing to the card once again.

Well?

Can you see the colors, Mike Wheeler?

"No," he lied, shaking his head vigorously. "It...It just looks gray to me, s-sorry," he avoided her gaze, suddenly interested in that loose string on his jeans once again. The nurse tilted her head, "Oh, don't be sorry, hon. You'll find her one 'a these days."

Her.

"Right," Mike mumbled.

Syd hummed, scribbling something onto a clipboard with a sparkly pink pen. "Thanks, sweets. You can go on back to class now."

Mike let out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding in and stood up, back stiff and palms suddenly sweaty despite the cold draft in the room. He walked towards the door, feeling more like a robot than a boy. *One foot in front of the other, breathe in, breathe out.*

Something compelled him to stop, hand poised just above the cool

metal handle—curiosity, probably. He spun around. "Um, Nurse Syd?"

The old woman looked up from her clipboard. "Hm?"

"Did you...?" Mike cleared his throat. "Did you ever find your soulmate?"

Syd's smile was sad, and Mike suddenly regretted not leaving quietly.

" 'fraid not, hon. Maybe if I'd traveled more than a foot past the Hawkins county line..."

"Oh."

"Oh, but don't go worrying about things like that," she said, smiling kindly. She pulled a cigarette out from behind her ear. "You're young—there's plenty of time for you to find your special girl, and you'll find her alright. I can *feel* it."

Mike supposed that was meant to make him feel better.

It didn't.

He left the school nurse to light her cigarette, feeling even more anxious than before. He shuffled past the line of students waiting outside her door—probably the rest of the W last names, maybe some X, Y's, and Z's if there were any. That meant they were finishing up the Soulmate Tests. The dance was set for the end of the week—Friday night. 4 days left and this will all be over, he thinks.

You'll find her someday, she said.

No, he didn't think he would.

Soulmate, soulmate, soulmate.

Because there was a lot of people like Nurse Syd—people who never found their one true person, doomed to a life of black and white, **yada yada yada...**

But Mike Wheeler was not one of those people.

He knew exactly who his soulmate was.

He just wished he didn't.

2. Sunflowers

Summary for the Chapter:

A lil back story. The Party being cute and dorky. Also Mike is so in love - more at 11.

Will Byers showed up late to Mike's 6th period Geometry class on a rainy day.

Mike only remembered it was raining because of the boy's eyes. He'd been gazing out the window, counting the droplets as they rolled down the glass from the outside - 24...25...26... - Mrs. Wilkins never cared about paying attention in class, so long as you passed the tests. Mike had always liked the rain - it didn't lie like everything else did. Rain was gray, plain, undeceiving. Mike didn't look at it and know he wasn't seeing the real thing, colors hidden behind a sea of gray and gloom. Rain was simple, Mike liked it.

He wasn't sure what had caused him to look away from the window that day - he never bothered to pay attention to who was coming in and out of class. It just felt...foreign almost, they way the door opened timidly, squeaking on its old metal hinges, the soft, squelching footsteps making their way into the room, hesitant almost. Dark eyes momentarily shifted from the gloomy world outside to the front of the class, where a nervous looking boy stood, shoulders soaked from the rain and what looked like a class schedule clutched in his hand.

The new kid. He wore clothes that seemed almost too big for him, the neck of his *Sex Pistols* T-shirt stretched out and the knees of his jeans worn. He had a baby face - squishy cheeks and a slender nose.

And his eyes - stormy like the sky above. *Undeceiving.*

Beautiful, Mike remembered thinking. It caught him off guard, that

thought, sent his mind reeling - sent him wondering just where the hell it had come from.

And then, from the front of the classroom, those stormy gray eyes had shifted to meet his.

He remembered something strange washing over him then, crumpling under the boy's soft silver gaze - kinda like the moment of silence just after a movie ends. That half a second right after the outro music fades away, just before the credits begin to roll, and you have to blink back into reality, even...even if you don't really want to. That's what it felt like, staring back into those eyes - like calm - only it wasn't calm, because it sent Mike's heart pounding, blood rushing to his face.

Point blank - it freaked him *the fuck* out.

Mike made a vow to avoid those eyes and the boy they belonged to, that day.

He'd been doing a pretty good job too - pretending that he didn't spend most of his time thinking about curved lips, and stormy eyes that always seemed to catch him staring from across the cafeteria during lunch. He kept his distance, and everything was fine.

Until it wasn't. Until Will Byers was on the floor in front of him, just next to the bike racks in front of Hawkins High.

"*Shit, are you alright?*" He stuck his hand out for the other boy to grab.

"*Yeah, I think I just tripped over a rock...oh...*"

Mike had always assumed that when he found his soulmate, the color would come in all at once, like he'd blink and then - bam.

It was actually quite the opposite. They seeped in before his eyes, chasing away the black and the gray like thick syrup running down pancakes.

That's when Mike realized Will Byers's eyes weren't gray.

They were green (so green) and Mike couldn't seem to look anywhere

else. They'd deceived him, lied to him - those eyes, but Mike couldn't bring himself to give a damn.

God, he's amazing, he remembered thinking, Will's hand still warm in his.

That was the moment Mike Wheeler realized that someone Upstairs had fucked him over.

A boy. His soulmate was a boy! Was that even *allowed*?

"*I...I think I hear my mom calling me!*" he lied, ducking away from the boy. He'd sprinted all the way home that day, didn't even bother to pull his bike out of the bike rack. He just...*ran*, ran until his limbs ached and his lungs hurt, until the hot tears trickling down his cheeks dried against the wind. He didn't stop until he was in his room, eyes shut tight, like he could turn everything back to black and white if he tried hard enough, tune out the colors that suddenly just seemed *too loud* for him. This wasn't how it was supposed to go - his soulmate was supposed to be a *girl*, *goddamnit!* There must've been some kind of mistake.

You're *the mistake*, something deep inside whispered.

You're broken.

And maybe he was, but that didn't stop the butterflies from letting loose in his stomach the next day when Will Byers showed up at his door, looking rather cute in a big orange hoodie, nose and cheeks flushed pink from the cold.

He didn't talk about what happened, didn't stare up at Mike like some love-sick dweeb. He just...brought Mike his forgotten bike and asked him if he wanted to help him build a fort out in the woods behind his house with some plywood he found, green eyes shining almost as bright as the smile on his face. By that time, Mike was pretty sure his soulmate thing was one-sided, *midstakemistakemistake*. He didn't know that could happen, but he guessed it had.

Great.

So Mike dealt with it. He pushed everything down and became Will's

friend. They finished their fort, rightfully named *Castle Byers* and eventually, Mike invited the kid to D&D sessions with the Party. Slowly but surely, Will Byers became their resident Wizard, a fully fledged member of Mike's tiny group of geeks. He joked around with El and Dustin, teased Lucas about his hopelessly dorky crush on the girl with the red hair from his 5th period, and fit himself into their group like a missing puzzle piece - all the while *Mike* pretended he didn't want to kiss the little beauty mark just above the softness of the smaller boy's mouth, pretended he didn't wonder what it would feel to run his fingers through that dorky bowl-cut of his, *pretended* he wasn't absolutely dying inside at the thought of Will Byers finding his true soulmate one day, and everything was fine, great.

Great, perfect.

Not.

"Psst! Mike!"

Will Byers sat in the seat just above him in Mrs. Wilkins's 6th period math class. He wasn't a new student anymore, hadn't been for a couple of months - he was a fully fledged Hawkins High Survivor, now, just like the rest of 'em. The boy was twisted around in his chair, thin fingers resting just on the edge of Mike's desk, tapping idly. Mike could see the beginnings of a drawing etched into the pale skin of his hand, the ink smudged and fading - he wondered what it was.

"How was the Soulmate test?" Will asked after Mike met his eyes. He was wearing yellow today - a worn white *Journey* T-shirt layered over a soft looking flannel the color of a sunflower patch. Mike suddenly wanted an excuse to reach out and touch, wondering if it felt as soft as it looked, *wondering if Will felt as soft as he looked.*

"You know," Mike whispered back, rolling his eyes. "Same as every year."

"Don't sweat it, Mike. You'll find her someday," Will tapped his desk lightly, his trademark *Supportive Will Byers Grin* painted on his lips like a work of art.

Mike wished people would stop telling him that.

"Yeah, whatever," he muttered, his voice drowned out by the shrill ring of the school bell. *School's out*. He shoved his books in his bag and filed out of the classroom and into the hallway flooded with students, Will hot on his trail.

Walking through the Hawkins High hallway was a lot like walking into oncoming traffic, Mike thinks. Hectic, loud, *dangerous* - bump into the wrong asshole, and you're toast. It was eat or be eaten at *HHS*, and Mike and his friends were the perfect recipe to a whole-hearted meal.

"So, have you got the campaign all planned for tomorrow?" Will asked, weaving around a student or two to fall into step with Mike. He kept close to him, the backs of their hands brushed as they walked, Mike had the urge to reach out and intertwine their fingers - he didn't (*mistakemistakemis*-).

"Course," He replied, shrugging. "Its a good one, too. Just wait 'til you see the shit I'm gonna throw at you guys," he grinned wickedly, bumping against his friend playfully.

"Did I hear somethin' about a campaign, Wheeler?" someone called, coming up on his left. Dustin shoved a number 2 pencil into his jeans pocket, elbowing his way past a couple of annoyed looking girls to get to them. "Care to give us a little sneak peak? You know - so we're prepared."

"Nope," Mike said, grinning at Dustin's groan. "You're just gonna have to hold out until tomorrow. You got the snacks?"

"Uh-huh. You guys said bbq chips, right?"

"Sour cream and onion," he and Will said in unison. "We agreed on *sour cream and onion* this time, Dustin," Mike sighed. They maneuvered through the group of students streaming through the hallway, Dustin waving over to El - she pushed through kids like they weren't there and joined them, hooking arms playfully with Will.

Jane Hopper had been one of Mike's best friends since grade school,

the small girl catching his eye almost immediately when she walked into Mrs. Miller's third grade class brandishing a limited edition *X-Men Vs. Juggernaut* lunch box. She'd gotten her nickname the way any kid would - doing something *extraordinary*. Eleven skittles up her nose and one trip to the emergency room later, *El* Hopper was born. She always joked that she *swore* a couple were still lodged up there - that one day she'd sneeze and the last two would shoot right out. El was funny and sweet, and prettier than *any* girl *Mike* had ever seen, and sometimes he prayed to God that one day he'd touch her hand with his and she'd see the colors. Because Mike Wheeler really did love Eleven...just not the way he wished he did. She knew him better than anyone though, knew when he was sad, knew how to call him out when he was being a dick - sometimes he even thought she knew about Will, what with the way her eyes always flickered towards his when soulmates were brought up, deep brown and *annoyingly* all-knowing. Mike thought about telling her sometimes, he knew she'd pull him into a warm hug and cuddle him like the mother-hen she was.

But Mike didn't want to be coddled.

He just wanted to be *normal*.

"We did *not* vote on sour cream and onion," Dustin argued, eyes widening and hands going up in defense. "El, did we, or did we not vote on bbq chips for tomorrow?"

El wrinkled her nose. "Definitely barbeque. There's no way I'm going to sit in that basement while all of you have onion breath," she teased, reaching over to tug playfully at the few stray curls atop Mike's head - she ignored the middle finger pointed in her direction with a cheeky grin, much to Mike's annoyance.

"*Thank you*," Dustin sighed. "I knew I wasn't goin' crazy - hey wait, where's Lucas? We passed his class a while back."

"Right here," the last member of their Party pushed his way through the dwindling crowd to join them, books piled in his arms. "Had to go to my locker for these stupid textbooks. If I fail that Geo test tomorrow I'm never gonna see the light of day again - Ready for the campaign tomorrow, Wheeler?"

"Yep," Mike replied. "And it's a good one, too, so if any of you assholes decide to die right in the beginning, I swear I'll - "

"Watch where you're goin', *Frog-face*," Troy appeared out of nowhere, shoving his way through the space in between Mike and Will with enough force to break the group into two. "Don't make me fuckin' dissect you," he spat, Travis snickering behind him. "Yeah, *Frog-face*, don't make him dissect you" he said - (*Is there a fuckin' echo in here?* Mike thinks). They were gone as quick as they had appeared, leaving a collective feeling of annoyance in the now-almost-empty hallway, lingering like a bad smell.

"Whatever," Mike mumbled with an eyeroll, cheeks hot with embarrassment. He *hated* when Will saw things like that, *shit* - as if he could get any more pathetic, anyways.

The five of them pushed through the front doors at the end of the hallway, immediately caught up in the crisp autumn wind.

Mike pulled his jacket tighter around himself, taking in the soft gloomy sunlight and the orange and red leaves fluttering past them and the flushed faces of his friends.

"You know, you don't look like a frog, Mike," Will told him softly as the five of them walked towards the parking lot. "Troy's just being an a-hole."

"*Yeah*, I mean, you don't look a *lot* like a frog, just a little, you know? - *ow!* El, what the hell was that for?" Dustin cradled his right arm, looking hurt. "I said he didn't look a *lot* like a frog!"

"Gee, thanks, Dustin," Mike deadpanned.

"Whatever man - Who cares what the hell Troy says, anyways?" Lucas asked. "He's failing like, *all* his classes. By the time he graduates high school, he'll be calling your son *Frog-face Jr* in the lunch line."

Mike cracked a smile at that.

After a few more cracks at Troy and the promise of a kick-ass D&D campaign, Mike was waving goodbye to the Party and wandering off the bike rack, cool autumn wind in his hair and Will at his side. He

unchained his bicycle, frowning when he noticed his was the last one. "You walkin' home today?" he asked.

Will shook his head. "Johnathan's picking me up. We're going to the record store," he practically bounced as the words left his mouth, cheeks flushing rather nicely in the light of the afternoon. Will loved music, spent half of his time making mixtapes and drawing in his room to the tune of *The Clash* or *David Bowie*.

"Going to go buy more weird, loud music tapes then, I see?" Mike teased, poking him in the side.

Will giggled, rolling his eyes. "They're not *weird*. They're different. Some of us listen to more than just *Wham!*, you know."

"Hey - George Michael sings like an angel!"

Will snorted, and *God*, Mike wanted to kiss him *so bad so bad so bad*. "You're funny, Mike Wheeler."

"You're *funny-lookin'*, Will Byers."

Another smile, this one softer, sweet - like candy on Halloween night. Will glanced behind him, spotting something familiar in the school parking lot. "Oh- that's Johnathan. See ya tomorrow."

Mike didn't want him to go. "Yeah," he agreed, suddenly deflated. "Tomorrow."

He turned his back to Will to prop himself on the seat of his bike, only spinning around at the mention of his name.

"Hey. Mike?"

Will was glowing the afternoon sunlight, eyes alight and inked hands tucked into the deep pockets of his frayed jeans. He scuffed the rubber of his sneaker on the sidewalk beneath him.

"For the record, I don't know what Troy's talkin' about. *I* think you're handsome."

And then he was gone, leaving Mike Wheeler weak in the knees, and

warm in the chest.

Notes for the Chapter:

So that was the 2nd chapter! Uhhh make sure to tell me what you thought and help a shister out and lemme know if anyone was out of character !!

@ those 5 ppl who commented on the 1st chapter? I love you, ur doing amazing sweeties.

validate me on [my tumblr](#) !!!

Author's Note:

HMmm pls comment something if u wanna read more of this cos idk

leave me prompts on [my tumblr](#) if you want, I do ask box fics as well

luv :)